



Frontline Health Workers

Preventing Malnutrition

When Sangeeta Pardhe, a widow raising her three children in the Sharadnagar slum of Pune, India, wanted to give something back to her community, she decided to become a frontline health worker (FHW). Following an intensive health training course, Sangeeta began to visit households to assess health needs, provide basic treatment and refer serious cases to clinics. Sangeeta, who is supported by a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) program, weighs all young children each month to monitor growth and provides care givers with nutrition and hygiene education. She also ensures that children are immunized and that childhood illnesses are properly managed. Sangeeta has been instrumental in reducing malnutrition among children in her community. In a short period, Sangeeta worked directly with 200 children, and today, and not a single child under age 3 in the slum is severely malnourished.

More than 156 million children worldwide will not reach their full potential because of early exposure to malnutrition.¹ Proper nutrition is critical for the health and development of children, particularly during the first 1,000 days – the period between a woman’s pregnancy and her child’s second birthday. Malnutrition stunts a child’s growth, impairs cognitive development, increases susceptibility to disease, and affects future productivity. Nearly 6 million children die each year before their fifth birthday, with malnutrition responsible for nearly half of those preventable deaths: over 7,000 children each day.² Malnutrition has a devastating impact on the health and cognitive development of children, but with the help of frontline health workers supported by robust health systems, it is fully preventable.

Health Workers Expand Access to Nutrition Services

Frontline health workers (FHWs) are crucial to the success of advancing proper nutrition during the first 1,000 days and beyond. Rural or remote communities in developing countries often face geographic and economic barriers to accessing proper nutrition, information, and medical care. Serving as counselors, educators and treatment providers, FHWs provide services directly to families in their homes and in local clinics. As FHWs generally come from the communities they serve, they are better able to provide health services that are culturally appropriate, and often more effective.¹

By screening children for malnutrition, treating diarrhea, promoting breastfeeding, distributing vitamins and other micronutrients, and counseling mothers about balanced diet, hygiene, and sanitation, FHWs provide life-saving services in communities.

Unfortunately, the world faces a severe shortage of doctors, nurses, and midwives; recent estimates project the world may be short 18 million health workers by 2030.⁶ This deficiency would have a devastating impact on curbing malnutrition and related health complications, threatening decades of global health progress under US leadership.



US Leadership has Improved Outcomes

The US government has been instrumental in fighting child malnutrition at both the programmatic and policy levels. Through major initiatives including Feed the Future and the USAID Multi-Sectoral Nutrition Strategy, the US government set ambitious goals to decrease child malnutrition. By supporting evidence-based, country-led programs that address the root causes of malnutrition, US efforts are driving notable progress.³ For example, in countries where Feed the Future works, significant decreases in poverty and stunting have already been seen, with further effects likely due to the long-term nature of the changes implemented.³ The US has also played a crucial role in elevating nutrition on the global agenda through its support for the Nutrition for Growth Summit in 2013, and for the global movement, Scaling up Nutrition (SUN), which brings together governments of high-burden countries, donors, civil society groups, multilateral institutions, and the

private sector to combat malnutrition.^{1,4}

By supporting country-driven programs, the US has been crucial in improving nutrition worldwide, including significant reductions in deficiencies of vital micronutrients like Vitamin A, iron and iodine; improved community access to diverse foods and increased consumption of quality foods; and improved nutrition using community-based models that integrate nutrition, gender, agriculture, and water and sanitation.³ By delivering a package of high-impact nutrition-related interventions reinforced with behavior change communications activities, USAID-supported programs in areas with high child mortality and rates of under-nutrition have also witnessed significantly increased initiation of exclusive breastfeeding and lowered anemia rates.³ These efforts rely on the crucial role of health workers at the frontlines of care.

BY THE NUMBERS: Frontline Health Workers Fighting Malnutrition



18M projected global shortage of health workers needed to deliver essential services by 2030 without concerted action

156M children currently suffer from chronic under-nutrition

2.6M preventable child deaths occur annually from under-nutrition

18M children under 5 are reached through US government-supported nutrition programs

The US Can Accelerate Global Progress

To accelerate progress toward eliminating malnutrition, the US government should develop and implement a coordinated and comprehensive health workforce strategy or action plan that outlines how it will contribute to strengthening the global health workforce to provide nutrition-related and other essential health services. This strategy should include concrete targets and clear accountability mechanisms for monitoring progress.

The strategy should align with the global health Workforce 2030 strategy and the recommendations for multi-sectoral action by the High-Level Commission on Health Employment and Economic Growth to invest in a sustainable health workforce. In addition, support for frontline health workers should be integral in the whole-of-government and USAID-specific strategies on nutrition.

Citations

1. *Unicef / WHO / World Bank Group (2016) Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates: Key findings of the 2016 edition.*
 2. *UNICEF Data (2016): Monitoring the Situation of Children and Women.*
 3. *Feed the Future. (2016) Progress Report*
 4. *Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) (2016) The SUN Movement Strategy and Roadmap. <http://scalingupnutrition.org/about-sun/the-sun-movement-strategy/>*
 5. *Save the Children. (2012) Nutrition in the First 1,000 Days. http://www.womendeliver.org/assets/NutritionintheFirst1000Days_2012.pdf*
 6. *UN Secretary-General's High-Level Commission on Health Employment and Economic Growth. Working for Health and Growth: Investing in the Health Workforce. September 2016.*
- Cover photo by Trevor Snapp, IntraHealth International. Back photo by Morgana Wingard, IntraHealth International.



The Frontline Health Workers Coalition is an alliance of United States-based organizations working together to urge greater and more strategic U.S. investment in frontline health workers in developing countries as a cost-effective way to save lives and foster a healthier, safer and more prosperous world.